Integrity and Mental Health: Examining the Relationship Between a Student's Ethical Beliefs and Levels of Psychological and Emotional Adjustment

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Project Summary

The purpose of this research proposal is to investigate how the pursuit of academic integrity is related to a student's mental health and emotional adjustment. How might the act of endorsing an ethical belief system, which is amenable to social psychological investigation, relate to a student's mental health and emotional adjustment from a clinical psychological perspective? If levels of mental health and emotional adjustment do indeed covary with the endorsement of various ethical belief systems, then this information would contribute to a greater understanding of why it is in a student's best interest to adhere to a life of academic integrity.

Background

American students differ in the ethical ideologies that they endorse, ranging from a pragmatic, situation-based ethic (McCabe, 1992) to a principled, universalistic orientation to ethics (Schlenker & Wowra, 2004). Many self-confessed cheaters endorse a form of situation-based pragmatism that justifies lying and cheating as acceptable forms of behavior. These students are regarded as ethical pragmatists who engage in neutralization tactics like euphemistic language (e.g., "Everyone has to cheat nowadays to get ahead") in order to disengage the implications of their unethical acts from their desired identity as a 'good' college student who generally follows the rules (Sykes & Matza, 1968).

In contrast to the pragmatic student who is free to engage in whatever behavior will maximize his or her happiness in each academic situation, principled students are required to always tell the truth as well as avoid cheating on their exams and plagiarizing ideas from others. As a result, principled students may be particularly susceptible to the negative moral emotion of guilt (Tangney, 2002) and may also experience anxiety and depression for standing by an ethical standard despite interpersonal pressures to eschew them (e.g., President Lincoln experienced recurrent bouts of depression in his lifetime; Miller, 2002). Yet, principled students do not have to concern themselves with the possibility of interpersonal rejection or damage to their academic careers that are inherent risks of a pragmatic position.

Study Hypotheses

The first hypothesis is that college students who endorse a pragmatic ethical ideology will differ significantly in levels of mental health and psychopathology from students who endorse a principled ethical ideology. The act of endorsing a life of academic integrity or academic pragmatism is anticipated to relate to both psychological benefits as well as psychological costs, and it is therefore hypothesized that principled students and pragmatic students will both experience positive and negative emotions and levels of mental health and psychopathology.

As Aristotle suggests however, it is hypothesized that the endorsement of a principled ethic will, on the whole, relate positively to mental health and emotional adjustment and negatively to psychopathology and emotional maladjustment. Conversely, it is hypothesized that, on average, pragmatic students will express greater levels of negative affect and psychopathology. Finally, students who fit the profile of a moral hypocrite are expected to
express emotional experiences and psychological adjustment similar to pragmatic students (i.e., moral hypocrites are ethical pragmatists cloaked in academic integrity).

Biosketch:

Scott Wowra received his baccalaureate degree in psychology in 1996 from North Carolina State University, earning the departmental research award for a senior thesis addressing the problem of date rape in post-secondary schools. Scott then served as a statistical analyst and program evaluator for the South Carolina Department of Mental Health from 1997 to 1999, studying predictors of sexual predation among convicted felons. Scott also coordinated a separate research program examining the relations between mental illness and perceptions of self-efficacy, empowerment, and well-being.

Scott began his graduate training in 1999 and obtained a masters degree in experimental psychology from Wake Forest University in 2001. Scott regularly conversed with the department chair, Professor Mark Leary, about psychological perspectives of the self, impression management tactics, and the psychological functions of self-esteem. Intrigued by Professor Leary's research focus, which is located at the nexus of social psychology and clinical/health psychology, Scott applied for doctoral work at the University of Florida with Professor Barry R. Schlenker.

Scott is now a J. H. Miller Presidential Fellow at the University of Florida, and his research interests include the relations among a person's ethical thinking, his or her ethical behavior, and the implications of ethics to a person's mental and physical functioning. Again, Scott's research questions are stimulated by a significant problem in the American educational system—rampant cheating among its students.

Professor Schlenker and Scott propose that people differ in the extent to which they endorse principled or pragmatic ethical systems. A principled ethic emphasizes universal codes of conduct and stresses the importance of honesty in one's interpersonal dealings, whereas a pragmatic ethic emphasizes situation-based ethics, maintaining a flexible posture to ethics and adapting to situational opportunities, and engaging in actions that maximize one's personal interests.

In his dissertation, Scott intends to pursue his social psychological and clinical interests by examining the relationship between ethical thinking, academic misconduct, and health among post-secondary students. Do students who endorse a principled ethic differ in levels of psychological and physiological stress and well-being relative to students who endorse a pragmatic ethic? Preliminary data suggests that principled students express greater levels of self-esteem, optimism, and prosocial behavior relative to their pragmatic peers, who report greater levels of alienation, cynicism, and a proclivity to engage in deception in order to obtain their goals.

If differences in ethical thinking and ethical behavior do, in fact, relate to a student's health, it is argued that instructors can use this information to engage students in rational discourse regarding the benefits and costs of various ethical positions to a student's health. It is hypothesized that there are no easy ethical paths to the good life, but as Aristotle suggested, it is expected that the endorsement of a principled ethic is more conducive to personal health and well-being than endorsing a pragmatic path, and that adherence to a principled ethic better prepares students for the ethical challenges of adulthood.